

**Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project**  
**Labor Archives of Washington**  
**University of Washington Libraries Special Collections**

**Renee Stern**  
**Teacher, Franklin High School**  
**Member, Seattle Education Association**

**Interviewee:** Renee Stern

**Interviewers:** Conor Casey

**Subjects:** COVID-19, pandemic, teacher, union, school, Seattle Public Schools, SEA, Seattle Education Association, students, classroom, class, high school, teaching, PPE, sanitize, remote learning, Seattle, sickout, technology gap, social justice curriculum, ethnic studies, Black Lives Matter

**Location:** Seattle, Washington via Zoom

**Date:** October 7, 2020

**Interview Length:** 00:55:23

**File Name:** SternRenee\_2020\_C19\_Video\_Interview\_Completed.mp4

CONOR CASEY 00:00:16: Good afternoon. This is Conor Casey for the Labor Archives of Washington. I'm interviewing this afternoon, Renee Stern, who is an educator in Seattle for part of the "Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project" through Labor Archives at the University of Washington. Today is October 7, 2020, and it's 4:38pm. Thank you for being willing to be interviewed today, Renee. And I wonder if you could say your name. And if you could spell out your first and last name?

RENEE STERN 00:00:46: Happy to be here. My name is Renee Stern. And that's R-e-n-e-e. Last Name: S-t-e-r-n.

CONOR 00:00:54: Thank you. And if you're comfortable, I'm going to ask you some demographic questions so that we don't make normative assumptions, but feel free to answer whatever way you feel comfortable. If you could, talk about when you were born and where you were born.

RENEE 00:01:12: I was born November 26, 1982, in Berkeley, California, Alta Bates Hospital, same hospital as my grandmother!

CONOR 00:01:20: Great. Okay. And what race or ethnicity do you identify as?

RENEE 00:01:27: I'm white.

CONOR 00:01:28: Okay. And in terms of gender identity, do you have any preferred pronouns? How do you identify?

RENEE 00:01:34: She/her is fine.

CONOR 00:01:36: Okay, and where do you live now?

RENEE 00:01:40: I live in the Mount Baker neighborhood in Seattle.

CONOR 00:01:43: Okay, thanks. I wonder if we can talk a little bit about your occupation now. What's your occupation or profession?

RENEE 00:01:51: I am a high school teacher. I teach English as a second language and social studies.

CONOR 00:01:58: Okay. What school do you teach at?

RENEE 00:02:01: I teach at Franklin High School, which is in the south end, Rainier and MLK, right at that intersection.

CONOR 00:02:08: Okay. How long have you been teaching in that job?

RENEE 00:02:12: This will be my 11th year.

CONOR 00:02:15: Wow. Were you in the profession before then? Is this your first job in the profession, or have you been teaching before then?

RENEE 00:02:22: No, I was at Garfield High School prior to that, Cleveland High School prior to that. I've been at Franklin— this is my eighth year now at Franklin. Before that, I had a job in environmental consulting, and then chose to go into teaching after that. Got my Master's at Seattle University.

CONOR 00:02:45: Are you a member of a union?

RENEE 00:02:47: I am. I'm a member of SEA - the Seattle Educators Association.

CONOR 00:02:55: And could you remind me Are they affiliated with the National Education Association or the AFT [American Federation of Teachers]?

RENEE 00:03:01: Yes, NEA [National Education Association].

CONOR 00:03:02: Oh, NEA? Okay, cool. And how long have you been a member of the Union?

RENEE 00:03:07: Since I started teaching, but it's only been the last couple years I've actually been going to meetings and sort of getting my head in the politics and the machinations of all of it. So, about 11 years now.

CONOR 00:03:22: Yeah, it sounds like you've you've gotten very involved in some aspects of the union. Have you served any offices or on any [?committees?]?

RENEE 00:03:30: I've been an alternate rep. Right now, they're looking for more people to join committees, so I'm throwing my hat in the ring to be a part of some committees around race and equity. But it's still— I'm still learning a lot. It's a complicated and large organization. We've been on strike a couple times and I've helped with organizing—and the Janus decision [Janus vs. AFSCME], there was a lot of meetings around that and how to make sure that we could keep membership up. Franklin High School is very proud of its union membership. We're often sort of leading the charge in terms of strikes and other sorts of collective actions. That is one strength, I think, at the school I'm at people really care about organized labor.

CONOR 00:04:18: That's interesting. We're gonna get into this through multiple different sort of evils, but I'm wondering whether your work has been impacted or disrupted by the pandemic and, if so, how?

RENEE 00:04:33: No, it's exactly the same. *(laughs)* I can't imagine how it's the same at all. It's totally bizarre. I'm teaching online and instead of going into the building in my classroom, I shuffle into my bedroom, or my second bedroom, and try to teach classes and Wednesdays, it's a lot of nice meetings. I was very nervous about attendance and about student engagements with this format, but I've been happy to see that most of the students are showing up and are fairly engaged. Where I struggle the most is with my level one students. Those are students that are very new to English, that need a lot of support. Some of them are refugees and don't have much experience with technology or computers, so I spend a lot of time just teaching them the basics of "file," "save as," and "mute," and very, very rudimentary tech skills that they just don't have.

00:05:44: So, that's hard and it's sad, and the inequities are getting worse. There's something powerful about everyone going to the same building. It's a leveling, equalizing force; the rich kids are in the building, the poor kids are in the building. We all have the same facilities, we're all going to the bathroom, but now, when I call in to some of my students, I just hear screaming kids in the background,

I hear parents. I have some students— one laptop, five kids, parents are working and it's just so hard on these families. So, it's— it's sad, in some ways, but there are some kids that are doing really well. So, that's interesting to see, too. They're the minority, but they're working hard, they like this format and, for them, it's working okay. It's just weird. *(laughs)* It's just so weird. And it doesn't quite feel real. At the end of the day, I'm like, "Did I do my job? Were they actually there? Was that a dream?"

00:06:53: With teaching, face to face in-person interaction is so important, especially for students learning English and trying to figure out the culture here. So, it's tough, tough, tough. I could ramble on and on and on about it for quite a while. I love my job and I love the kids. I'm lucky to, again, be a part of a union and have job security because I was very concerned and we're all still very concerned. I have a colleague who teaches ceramics and she has had the hardest time, like "How do I transform my curriculum, from ceramics to doing online instruction?"

00:07:37: So, a lot of teachers having this challenge. And woodshop — I'm not sure what the woodshop *(laughs)* teacher is doing. A lot of people being very creative right now. I'm teaching social studies. Right now we're trying to learn about the election, which is insane. *(laughs)* Still trying to explain the electoral college and my students are like, "What? Why is that? Why did that happen?"

00:08:08: It's tough, but, overall, happy with engagement. I was very concerned that most kids would just drop off completely. I'm really taking care of my advisory students - that's 20 students. I look after their grades, make sure they graduate. It's social-emotional support. So, every Wednesday, we just sort of talk about: how are you taking care of yourself? And what is your identity? How do you identify? What do you do if someone is mean to you?

00:08:40: Talking about racism, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, all these sorts of issues pop up in advisory, and it's a really great time where we can just have open discussion, support each other, and be very honest about how hard and weird this time is. And some students really are in mourning. They miss sports, they miss being in school, and it hurts for them. They're just, like, "I miss being in class, I really miss seeing you, Ms. Stern," and that's hard.

00:09:16: But we're doing the best we can. As I've talked to other colleagues, it's a fucking pandemic. We're teaching in the middle of a fucking pandemic! *(laughs)* The meeting I just left, we talked about how we need to give the kids a break and putting zeros in the gradebook right now is not helpful for a lot of students, that's just gonna cause them to disengage more. So, how we grade right now is a big question. Right now, I'm going to be— students that haven't turned in work, I'll be giving them sort of 50% so that it's not just this hopeless hole of like, I just have zero I'm going to give up. If they turn into work, they can bump it up to a C or C minus, so we're all figuring it out as we go. Social-emotional learning, again, is one of the priorities here, but the kids are hungry for content, too. They want to learn so I don't want to coddle them too much. So, anyway, those are my random random ramblings about my current profession and employment right now.

CONOR 00:10:21: Well, one of the things you brought up, I thought was a really interesting issue is relating to the tech gap and how technology reinforces or exacerbates different social differences and class differences. I wonder if there's been any strategies that people have tried to come up with to get—How did these students get access to WiFi? Have they been able to borrow technology? Or how are they even doing this?

RENEE 00:10:48: So, we have some pretty awesome people at Franklin that have delivered laptops and WiFi hotspots and we have awesome bilingual instructional assistants that have been calling families, speaking their first language, figuring out how to get a hotspot to that apartment building that's functional. Of course, some of the hotspots are better than others. So, some students still can't stream video and have a hard time. But I am proud that Franklin—yeah, they've gotten all the kids laptops that need laptops. They've gotten, I believe, WiFi to everyone that needs WiFi. So, that's pretty awesome. Again, the quality of the WiFi varies widely and there are still students that pop in and out of meetings, their connection will drop, and then I have to readmit them to the meeting. So, that's been interesting.

00:11:39: There was a bit of drama the first week — I forgot about this, we had Teams bombing. Some students had shared the link for Microsoft Teams and it had gotten out of hand. Then some students, or adults, we don't really know, from outside the school, were jumping into classrooms, and, sort of, swearing, and there was all this—racial slurs being thrown at one teacher. Really crazy behavior. And now we've clamped down on security—can't share your team's link and I'm very careful about who I admit or don't admit to the class. That was a dramatic week that we had a lot of teachers were pretty rattled by having these random people jump in and destroy their class. Weird. But yes, the tech gap is real, and, obviously, rich kids with resources are doing just fine and the kids that were doing pretty well in person are also doing pretty well. The kids that were struggling before are struggling even more. So, again, it's that disparity deepening, which sucks.

CONOR 00:12:52: When you talk about that cohort of 20 students that you advise directly, is that a one-on-one situation or is it as a group?

RENEE 00:12:59: It's as a group, but I also meet with them one-on-one occasionally, if they're having issues and whatnot, but every Wednesday we have our little community circle and check-ins. It's not a graded class, it's pass or fail, so the stakes are pretty low. I knew them last year so I have that prior relationship, which is so important right now.

CONOR 00:13:22: You've touched on this in other areas and I'm curious if any of the concerns or experiences—or affective aspect of some of the students' experiences—jump out at you? What are some of the stories that you remember them conveying to you about this particular time and their concerns and worries?

RENEE 00:13:43: They feel—some of them do miss being in person, they miss being with their friends. Oddly, some of many students in my advisory are very happy; I have a chunk of boys that like gaming, and they've shared each other's handles, and they're all gaming together and building social connections through gaming. So, my advisory—many of them are very happy online and feel like they're getting social connections and like they're learning pretty well in this format. It's the kids that were more into soccer and had all these clubs and were really relishing the social part of high school that I think are struggling. But, again, a lot of the kids are doing okay, but we haven't had very in-depth discussions. It's been a little surface level and, again, I don't push too hard because it's their personal life. They don't have to share too much with me. It's just: how are you taking care of yourself? What's one thing that you want to work on? What's a question you have? Those very basic sorts of things. I haven't gotten big stories, really.

CONOR 00:14:53: In terms of the evolving practice—When this pandemic first happened, it was right in the middle of the school year and this is the first new school year since it happened. Can you compare and think about what last year was like compared to this year and how your strategies have evolved?

RENEE 00:15:13: Yeah. In March, Franklin kind of led the way. The pandemic was starting to ripple through. My husband, who works in tech, he got the call from his employer to start working from home and yet I was still coming to work every day. I thought that was interesting. As teachers, we were starting to really wonder: why are we coming to work every day when so many companies are encouraging people to work from home? Then my colleague, Jolene, and several other teachers at Franklin, we did a sickout. I think about 30 teachers, we all called in sick. They weren't able to get enough substitutes in, and so they basically shut down the school for the day. The next day, the district shut down. Denise Juneau, our superintendent, shut down the schools, and then, I think the next week, the entire state shut down. Yeah, that was something that Franklin led, in some ways, for the district. It was very disruptive. It's a bit of a blur, honestly. It was so traumatic, but we were flying by the seat of our pants, not quite sure what we were doing. We have a learning platform called Schoology, which I don't like very much, but we have to use it because it's the district-approved software, and I was having students complete work through that. In the spring, we were told, everyone gets an A or an incomplete. The grading for teachers—that was tough. We felt like, okay, our power has been taken away, and our ability to grade has been taken away, which is frustrating. I was very generous with grades, gave most kids A's, unless they were totally checked out, then they got an incomplete, but it was, again, this idea: we're gonna fucking pandemic, give the kids a break and give ourselves a break and take care of ourselves. It was just kind of panicked, chaotic, and, again, flying by the seat of our pants. I know there's a lot of frustration with union members, and myself included, that the summer was wasted. We could have spent the summer really gearing up to have a high quality, remote instruction year. Instead, it was a lot of meetings and back and forth with the district in the union wondering, "Oh, are we going to do hybrid or not do hybrid?" and just arguing over all these sort of tangential issues instead of really thinking through or making the call earlier, like we're going to do a semester remote, and we're going to be using these tools, we're going to be giving these resources to teachers. And that didn't happen. I hate

to say it, but I do feel like the fall isn't that much different than the spring. There's a little more support, a little more coordination, but the district [makes sound indicating mockery] (*laughs*)—our professional development has been lacking, and it's frustrating. I wish the summer had been more productive, and I wish that I—

CONOR 00:18:13: [Zoom recording interruption] I'm recording again. Well, first of all, I wanted to know: were you all originally considered, or are you considered an essential worker, by the Stay Home Stay Healthy [Order by] the governor?

RENEE 00:18:42: I don't remember. I think we were recently, yes, designated that, but prior to that we were not? I don't know, actually. That's a good question. It would be a question for the union.

CONOR 00:18:57: You mentioned the sickout. I'm distinguishing, from a union history perspective, was that an action of the Local? Was it a Wildcat thing, organized by people who are members of the local, but more of an [on-the-] ground thing response by educators that informally organized that?

RENEE 00:19:16: It was an informal response by educators. I think we were frustrated with the union and the lack of leadership. We were just feeling like, "What's happening? Everyone else is not going to work. Why are we going to work? Where's the union? Why aren't we getting any emails?" So, it was us wanting to push things forward a bit and feeling like we weren't safe.

CONOR 00:19:39: Did you feel that the reason that the district all of a sudden decided to change their policy the next day is because of your action?

RENEE 00:19:47: I think that's what Franklin people like to think. I don't know if that's the case, but I know it was a pain in the ass for the district (*laughs*) to get all the subs together and try to organize the kids and explain to parents why this group of teachers didn't feel safe going to work. (*laughs*) At that point, I think students were not coming to school, either. It was just bizarre. So, it made sense to me, although I did feel guilty because my students tend to show up, and they were showing up and they were confused, like, "Where are the teachers?" They went to the auditorium and— It was hard for me to explain, but the days previous, they were wondering, like, "Why are we still here? What's happening?" It was very strange, but the lack of leadership was a huge issue, so the sickout, I think, was helpful, and we'll do it again, if they try to push us back into school. (*laughs*)

CONOR 00:20:42: Did they try to provide personal protective equipment while you were still doing on site classes? Have they talked about that at all if they decide to try to do it in person again?

RENEE 00:20:54: Yes, it's in the union MOU, Memorandum of Understanding. The big drama right now is with HVAC systems, trying to make sure that circulation is healthy within buildings. Franklin was built in 1912. We have an adorable custodian that put up some streamer paper on a vent, and it was

blowing and he sent an email saying, "It's good, we're all good."*(laughs)* In our MOU, we are also able to request a specific HVAC inspection before going back into buildings, so I will be doing that. I don't want to be in my building right now. It's not—that ventilation is not good and that makes me very nervous. It's an airborne virus, so don't want to be inside. But no—no PPE, and, in theory, we are going to be provided PPE, but teachers—we're just used to doing so much with so little and our expectations are so low of leadership of the district, and, frankly, the union as well that— We'll do our own thing. We buy all our own supplies, so we'd be buying our own masks, and a lot of us are buying our own software and just rolling with it, but we'll see.

CONOR 00:22:24: It sounds like some teachers and some students were bringing stuff. Can you talk about that?

RENEE 00:22:29: Were what?

CONOR 00:22:31: It sounds like teachers and students might have been bringing their own personal protective equipment. Were they?

RENEE 00:22:37: Students were. Teachers were not, at that time in March. Specifically, my students from China, who have a lot of— more experience with— they remember SARS, some of them and, in that culture, it's just more normal to wear a mask when they're sick. So, yes, and those students from China were the most concerned, too. They were like, "Why are we still in school? This is serious."

Other than that, teachers were not wearing masks. We were anxious, all looking at each other, like, "Why are we still working when most of the private sector is at home?" I don't think we knew a whole lot at that time. How— if it was airborne? That might have been around the same time where we were getting mixed messages on the masking, and it was just—it was very confusing. We now know today, yes, we need masks and all of that. But, teachers, I remember, were all buying hand sanitizer—that's one thing—and wiping down our desks. That's right— I had forgotten about that. I spent a ton of money on hand sanitizer. At the beginning of class, "Here's your hand sanitizer."

I had the little wipes that no one can buy anymore and, at the end of every class, they would wipe down. The district gave us a total of—they gave me some gloves and one little thing of hand sanitizer and one container of little Clorox wipes, and I teach 100 kids. That's not as many as some of my colleagues; they have 150 kids. *(laughs)* One little box of Clorox wipes is not going to cut it. *(laughs)* There was a COVID scare. Someone who tested positive was in the building, and then they did a deep clean, but I had a colleague who inspected the deep clean, and it was not a very deep clean. We saw a lot of dirt, and we don't have a whole lot of faith necessarily in the deep cleaning that the district does. Also don't have a lot of faith that an HVAC system inspection done by the district will necessarily be accurate. We want independent inspections. Anyway, I work with a bunch of assholes. *(laughs)* Don't trust our employer very much. March feels like a blur.



CONOR 00:25:01: Well, in relation to that I'm talking about, overall, the whole school, how did your workload and the workload of teachers and the custodial staff and the people that were expected to do deep cleaning— How did that change from the spring to the summer to the fall?

RENEE 00:25:22: In the spring, it was just panic mode, and I'm sure the custodial staff workload went up. I think they were hiring for more custodians, I think they still are. In terms of my workload, it was this sudden, huge learning curve of, "How do I take that class and put it online? How is that even going to work?" It was just hard. It's a little easier this time, I think. My workload is just sort of strange. It's nice working from home. Monday morning is my prep time. I'm able to get caught up during that period. It's a little harder to collaborate. I have a teacher colleague; we teach a joint humanities class. She does the language arts side, I do the social studies side. We don't have shared prep time where we can sit down in the classroom and show student work and talk about students in the building. We are still meeting once a week through zoom and having chats, but it's not the same. Grading is really hard and exhausting right now, more so than in-person. Just looking through all the— First of all, our district technology isn't great, so I'm going from Schoology to Office 365 to Power Teacher Pro, and I'm having to—just a lot of clicking. My friend was like, "Yeah, it's just all day clicking. Click, click, I have so many clicks."

Then, communicating with students through email, through the Schoology websites, and through, like, five other different tools. Just a different kind of workload, overwhelming. I get screen fatigue. At the end of the day, I have often headaches and feel really sort of weary. I'm also not used to sitting this much. Part of why I went into teaching is that, oh, I get to stand up and go help little kids over there and move around. Now I feel suddenly very sedentary and I understand more now people that have desk jobs. I did not want a desk job, but I now have a desk job. I can use my Apple Watch to stand up every now and then, but it's not the same. That's been a little hard, and I'm sure other teachers would report that as well, physically just feeling kind of "Whoa." (*laughs*) I hope that answers your question, I'm not sure.

CONOR 00:28:00: Yeah. Did your instructional, pedagogical mode change? How did you adapt that? What are you using now that's different than before?

RENEE 00:28:09: Whew. Still working on that. Let's see (pause) I'm struggling right now tremendously with my level one students who really benefit from one-on-one and from in-person. My level two students, they're more intermediate, so they have some—they have much higher English language acquisition. In terms of pedagogy, I'm trying less lecture. Nobody wants to lecture all the time, that's awful. I'm trying to shorten the amount of direct instruction that I do. In the spring, I was using software called Screencastify where I could record myself giving the direct instruction modeling and provide captions, and then it would post on YouTube. Kids could watch at once, watch it again. I haven't done that yet this year, but I may, and students who can't come to class, for whatever reason, if they're

working or taking care of siblings, they could access that. There are some cool tech tools out there that I used previously and I will probably be using again in the next week or two.

I want to do more inquiry because I think that's just more motivating in general, and around the election and problems and challenges in America today. A lot of them are interested in homelessness and taxes and health care and why they're a problem today and what possible solutions could be made. I'm trying to, right now, scaffold research projects that will be motivating for students around big questions. "What does it mean to be an American?" has always been the question that I've used, and I'm still using that, but especially interesting and motivating right now in an election season. One thing that's really hard for myself and especially for some other teachers is you can't do group work. We haven't figured out how to do group work. We just now got the power to do breakout rooms, but I haven't been able to use them very effectively. When the breakout rooms do happen, I'm able to pop in and check to see that kids are working productively, but they don't have much experience with it so a lot of them just turn the cameras off and don't know how to really engage in that way. It works well one-on-one.

The chat feature is actually kind of awesome. I get students participating via chat much more who would not usually participate or raise their hands in class. The more shy students, they'll type in their ideas, their questions. Microsoft Teams also has a translate function so students can translate from their first language back and forth. That's pretty cool. I can also do closed captions when I'm teaching, so as I'm giving instruction they can look at the English, which helps. You can also use Google Translate more now when I give them a Word document to work on

00:31:23: [Zoom recording interrupted]

CONOR 00:31:30: You were talking about all these different new tools that you were using as instructional design, and I think the last thing you mentioned is popping things into Word.

RENEE 00:31:41: Using online—a live Word documents where students—I give direct instruction, and then it's like a playlist where there's links they can go to, and fill them out, and then submit it through Office 365. That's fairly easy. I'm able to give feedback live, have them redo assignments, so that that works fairly well. But, again, this is for my students that are more tech savvy and comfortable using Office 365. I still have a chunk of students that really struggle with basic technology, that don't know how to use keyboards, really, and that's—I'm trying, but it's really hard.

CONOR 00:32:27: Do you know how your colleagues, that may not be represented by a union, who are also teachers responded? Do you know anybody who—what they're?

RENEE 00:32:35: I don't—I do have one colleague that dropped out of the union who was at Garfield. He was so upset with the politics going on there, but we sucked him back in at Franklin. I don't really have any coordination or interaction with non-unionized teachers. I would be curious how that's working

for them. I know I've never felt more happy to be in a union in my entire life than right now, right? The amount of unemployment and economic insecurity that most people are feeling is terrifying and it's awesome to have the protection of the union, and to have a contract, and to know that people out there are fighting for my health and my rights. It's not perfect, and leadership is often lacking, but we care, and I'm extremely happy not to have to be in-person in the building and not to have to put my health at risk or my colleagues, my older colleagues that are definitely high risk. I remember in March, during the sickout, unfortunately, or as teachers were starting to not go to in-person teaching despite not getting any information from the district—the subs that were getting thrown in were elderly ladies. A lot of our subs are retired teachers, just elderly. That was shocking to see, as well. They were replacing teachers with these even older substitutes. Yeah, so very happy to be in a— it's hard. Remote teaching is incredibly hard, but it's a wonderful thing to have the protection of the union and to try to do my job this way, and it's not all bad. Again, it's not all bad. Some kids are loving it and some of these tech tools are awesome. *(laughs)*

CONOR 00:34:40: How much of the pushback, or the enforcement of the union contract was using existing provisions about health and safety in the existing contract versus, it sounds like there's an MOU, which sounds like a more dynamic agreement in response to the pandemic. Do you know anything about this—about those things?

RENEE 00:34:59: I don't know the details about, but my union colleagues definitely would and health and safety was our primary concern. I know there's language right now in the MOU regarding reopening that if there's health data indicating we may reopen, there'll be a brand new committee formed with SPS [Seattle Public Schools] and SEA [Seattle Education Association] to plan that out and make—give it some structure. I know there was intense union drama and screaming and yelling and anger just around the MOU, around health and safety. Again, I was an alternate rep, and I've now become department head and I'm trying to teach, so it's very hard to balance spending time with union politics on top of everything else, but yes, we have this MOU, and so that's where we're clinging on to. One frustration people have with the MOU is around attendance. The way that I take attendance, I can put they're pending, they're absent. I'm supposed to check it, like, five times a day, like, "Are you present in the class?" but then if they have logged on to Schoology, or done any work on any assignment, they're technically present. My colleagues have complained, "It takes me an hour every day to do attendance. I have to check these five different places where these students have shown up or not show up." That's been somewhat challenging.

CONOR 00:36:25: Did you ever get sick from COVID? Or do you know anybody who did?

RENEE 00:36:29: I did not, and I don't have any colleagues that have gotten sick. I do have a friend that tested positive and was asymptomatic and was around a student who went to U dub [University of Washington], and there's been some outbreaks at U dub [University of Washington], but in terms of—I do have a student whose uncle died of COVID. We were talking through it. She just wrote in the chat

like, "Oh, yeah, my uncle died of COVID," Just very nonchalantly, like, oh, okay. So, it's affecting my students' lives, not so much my teacher colleagues. We've all been very careful.

CONOR 00:37:06: In response to this, I'm thinking about social networks and civil community. Have any of your family or friends or neighbors [inaudible] \_\_\_\_\_ there in any way as a result of the pandemic that you're aware of?

RENEE 00:37:20: Sorry, I missed the second half.

CONOR 00:37:23: Do you know of any family, friends or neighbors or your community who has helped each other as a result of the pandemic?

RENEE 00:37:31: Helped each other? (pauses) Well, in terms of my family—social support, checking in on my parents. I do feel like this has been especially hard on older folks just because they're at higher risk. I've been biking up to see my parents, doing social distance for coffee, checking in with them. I saw my in-laws, we had a little social distance picnic with masks, but I can only imagine how isolating and scary it must be to be in that demographic. Trying to reach out, keep in touch with friends that I know. My colleagues, we're on a pretty robust group chat. We're trying to support each other in our crazy fucking jobs and we bitch and moan (*laughs*) about how problematic things are, and bitch and moan about the union, bitch and moan about the district, bitch and moan about our students and how we don't feel like we're doing our jobs very well. That's been—Facebook has been helpful for some of my colleagues sharing their frustrations and providing feedback and support. So, Facebook—problematic, but also sometimes helpful for my colleagues.

CONOR 00:38:46: I wonder if you could walk through what an average day looks like right now for you.

RENEE 00:38:49: (*laughs*) Yesterday, got up at like seven, made my coffee, got all of my equipment together. I have my teacher laptop, which is really crappy and crashes. I have my nicer laptop that I'm using now, although I'm finding today the internet is not great. I have my phone, which I use to monitor chats, and sometimes admit students to Teams and then I also have my iPad that I use occasionally. So, I get that all set up, have breakfast, and then I have class, which is a Teams meeting, Microsoft Teams. We couldn't use Zoom. There was big drama over that. We thought Teams would be more secure, but the first week we had kids jumping in classes that didn't belong and swearing, so that didn't work. I have first period at nine o'clock and I tried to— It varies day by day, but we're doing a document based question around the Constitution and how it's supposed—how the framers wanted to make a new government that protected against tyranny, or having a king, that the Articles of Confederation didn't work. So, very basic things like that we're walking through, how the three branches of government are supposed to work (*laughs*) Right? I'm definitely emphasizing, "This is how it should work. Does it

work? We're gonna learn more about that next week, but this is the original thinking behind it. And it was all rich, white men that did that. Who is powerful still today? Rich, white men."

So, a little direct instruction. I will share a document; I share my screen, and then, through Schoology, which is their learning platform, they'll bring up a document, and I'll read some, I'll ask them to read. We do popcorn reading, so one student will read then call on another student as an attempt to keep kids on their toes. Vocabulary instruction's very important, so I usually pre-teach vocabulary prior to doing reading. We read and discuss, and I answer any questions, and then I'll give them an independent task to do for this latter half of class because class is, like, an hour and a half and it's not fair for me to talk the whole time. I usually— 50 minutes: vocabulary instruction, reading—I'll read it then they read it, some discussion questions, then here's an independent reading connected to what we had just discussed. "I will stay on Teams, but this is a chance for you to work on your own or with a partner, if you have someone that you'd like to work with and then we'll review it tomorrow. Stay on the Teams so I can give you credit for attendance."

That gives you a little look at it. Then I have lunch break. Then, 10:55 is my other class, then I have lunch, then I have from, gosh, 2:30 to 3:30 is my last class and the two classes at the end of the day are my level one students who are more needy, and who have more challenges with tech and who, often, are lost. When I call on them to talk, the background is just, like, yelling and screaming and [makes static sound] and they're dropping out and jumping back in. So, those are difficult, draining classes. It's hard for me to tell—is anyone paying attention? Am I getting anywhere with any of you? There's usually like two or three kids that are pretty engaged, but it's really hard. The tech is tough and—still working on it. I have very good bilingual instructional assistants that are working with those students one-on-one, and I'm just hoping that next week it will get a little better. At the end of the day, sometimes I have meetings, and some grading to catch up on, lots more clicking. Then I need to prep for the next day: get out my PowerPoint, get out the assignments, updates, Schoology updates, and arrange the folders in Schoology. I try to keep the most recent stuff at the top. So it's a lot of kind of boring, nitty gritty organization and grading and attendance and clicking and screens. (*laughs*) Then I have a headache and fall asleep (*laughs*) It's not that bad. It is getting easier, I will say that. It is getting a little easier.

CONOR 00:43:38: What has been the most challenging aspect of this, and I don't just mean work. Overall, what do you find the most challenging aspects of this?

RENEE 00:43:47: Dealing with the uncertainty, not knowing how long is this gonna last, and what does this mean? What is college going to look like for students? What is my job gonna look like in a year? That's been difficult. I never thought our country would be this dysfunctional. Like, wow. Every week, new levels of—it's hard because my students came here because they thought they can have a better life here. Yes, most of them are living much better lives than their parents, but (*groans, then laughs*)— It's really unfortunate that we were not able to manage this pandemic. For my students from China, they're like, "What is wrong with this country?"

In China, they take it very seriously and they follow group norms to take care of each other. At least, that's what I've been told. But, the uncertainty, it's just weird. I don't know where it's going. I have good days and bad days. Some days where it's, like, "Oh, I did an okay job today—" Students were learning and personally feeling more solid, I'm taking care of myself. I'm exercising and eating. And then bad days where I just feel weird and don't take very good care of myself and just feel like I'm in a strange spot. So lack of that certainty, lack of consistency, and lack of leadership, at our district and country (*laughs*)—been frustrating.

CONOR 00:45:24: In terms of the economic impacts, have you felt any economic impacts? Or did you feel like your housing situation felt threatened by the pandemic?

RENEE 00:45:32: I'm extremely lucky. Personally, no. My husband's employed, I'm employed. We haven't felt a thing (pauses) which is in stark contrast to most of my students. My advisory students, several of them—their parents have lost jobs, they're economically insecure, food insecure, housing insecure. We do have a social worker at Franklin that has rushed out to homes and provided gift cards for Safeway. There's rental assistance, so we are doing what we can, but most of my students, they're struggling. Their families are really hurting. A lot of my students have parents who work in restaurants, and are essential workers, so it's just been really hard, but I personally haven't felt that.

CONOR 00:46:22: Wondering if you can reflect about how the pandemic has changed your social life, and how—what kind of evolved and how your strategies have evolved over time. I mean, online or socially distant or whatever, over the course of the [?pandemic?]?]

RENEE 00:46:39: In terms of my social life, in the beginning I did this rush of wanting to connect with people and doing lots of Zooming. I'm in the Seattle Women's Chorus. We shut down pretty early, but we were still meeting once a week and trying to keep things going. I was participating in that, but everything shifted. I was someone that liked to go to parties and love to go to live music shows and would eat out usually once or twice a week. I enjoyed being out with people and that's not something I've been able to do. As the pandemic has continued, my social energy has decreased. I really am focusing on my parents, my husband's, close friends. I can't—and I'm letting go of the Seattle women's chorus. I know they're still trying to get together, but I can't imagine when we'll be able to rehearse again. That was a really important outlet for me, and I miss it. I miss music, going to shows. It's a lot of group chats. I have a couple different—I have group chats that I connect with, and they're wonderful. I feel lucky in that way. I have a really close work friend, we're actually—we're going to rent a place in Palm Springs and work remotely in Palm Springs next month, so that will be good and also take a little pressure off my husband because we've been together in the same house for a long, long time. He's a lovely human, but it's nice to have separate times. Social life has just shifted. I don't know. Do I feel lonely? I don't—I miss going to shows and I miss singing. The music part is a bummer.

CONOR 00:48:51: Were you all practicing in person or were you meeting by Zoom, at first?

RENEE 00:48:58: We shut down really early, actually, before it was even getting serious. Our director said, "We should not be meeting," and I'm so glad that we did because there was a lot of elderly people and there was that super spreader event in the Skagit Valley where many people died. Yeah, they were meeting on Zoom and we did little virtual chorus recordings and it was cute. But, at the end of the day, I don't want another Zoom meeting. Except for this one, of course. (*laughs*)

CONOR 00:49:29: I wonder if you can reflect on: how do you think life is gonna be different after this?

RENEE 00:49:37: That's a million dollar question, right? I don't think we're gonna throw it all away. I'm discovering some cool things that I can do teaching that I couldn't do in-person and discovering cool tools and discovering that, for a chunk of my students, this works better for them and they really like it. I hope that we can be creative. I hope that we can incorporate some of this. I hope that we don't have to go right back to the old system and be rigid. I hope that we can look at the good things that are happening right now and the way this is working for some teachers and for some students and build a education system that is more creative and flexible and interesting than the standard—okay, nine to five, period, bell schedule, ding, ding, ding. That's just so old-fashioned. So is summer break. I mean, the amount of the learning loss that goes on over the summer and—they're not farming. Why are we doing the summer break thing again? Maybe we can have more healthy breaks throughout the school year. I would just really like to see more interesting, creative thinking around how can we make education better and more accessible, more fun, and less of a drain and rigid old-fashioned system? That's my hope. I think we're going to value person-to-person interaction a lot more. I think we're going to, hopefully, invest more in relationships, but I don't know. I think about that a lot. Maybe we'll go right back to where we were before, but I hope not.

CONOR 00:51:22: What's surprised you the most of this [?pandemic?]?

RENEE 00:51:26: Surprised me the most? (long pause) I don't know. There's been so many layers. George Floyd, and the election, and the pandemic. I have a friend that said, "We're living through like the 1918 pandemic, a Civil Rights Movement, the rise of fascism, like three other different things." So it's— they're all layered together. Most surprising? (pauses) I guess how it's working well, for a larger group of students than I thought— that there's a pretty decent chunk of kids that are doing fairly well. That was surprising, that some of these tech tools and assignments are working for kids. It's positive in more ways than I would have thought. I was very negative, like, "This is going to be a nightmare, this whole school year is gonna be awful." There are days when I feel that way, but, more days than I would have thought where I feel like, "Well, that was actually a pretty good class—" and kids were getting it. They're turning in the work, and they're curious, and they're engaged. So, that's been a happy surprise.

CONOR 00:52:37: Well, you touched on the fact that this is a moment of—a civil rights moment. I also heard you mention the fact that you're serving on an Equity and Diversity Committee. I wondered if you could talk about your experience and participation of Black Lives Matter during the pandemic, which, kind of, rose out of it?

RENEE 00:52:57: So, Black Lives Matter. I'll be honest, I— Because of my own health, I did not do a lot of protesting. There was a large march, Beacon Hill, that I did participate in. I participated largely financially, again, because I'm financially secure, I'm able to give money to the local Black Lives Matter chapter and that's something that I have helped with. I'm just now going to— I haven't even had a meeting yet with the race and equity group, but Franklin High School is very committed to ethnic studies and incorporating that through—across the curriculum, including in, like, math classes. We have a lot of math teachers are like, "I don't teach ethnic studies, I teach math."

Well, no, you can incorporate social justice in math. So, pushing on colleagues to really change their framework, and really think more about equity. I have a whole training all day on Friday, where we're going to be talking about ethnic studies and how, as teachers and as a school, we can really focus on that. The Social Studies team, we're all doing Black Lives Matter curriculum. I'll be doing the Civil War and Reconstruction and making ties to today. Many of my colleagues are doing that as well. Black history is American history.

CONOR 00:54:20: Finally, are there any thoughts that you'd like to share? Or what have we missed that you feel like is important that we talk about?

RENEE 00:54:28: I feel like this is good. I feel like I've been a little scattered, but my experience has been scattered in this pandemic, that it's really hard and weird. I have moments, too, where it's like living in a utopia slash dystopia (*laughs*) where it's wow, I'm discovering all these new tech tools and I can get Amazon deliveries and my life is so much easier in some ways, but it's also a lot harder, inequities are getting larger and it is an interesting moment to make massive change. I hope that happens. I hope it's not wasted. I hope we don't just go back to where we were.

CONOR 00:55:09: Thank you so much for for agreeing to be interviewed and thank you for your time. If that sounds good to you, I'll stop recording now, but I'll do some housekeeping with you just after we stop recording, okay?

RENEE 00:55:21: Sounds good.